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Forms of the Divine

T. M. P. MAHADEVAN
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Sri Rama Krishna Vivekananda Seva Sadan

Vedanta Press

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VEDANTA
and the West

174

VEDANTA SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Vedanta Press

1946 VEDANTA PLACE ● HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA 90028

First Published July-August, 1965

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Six numbers of *Vedanta and the West* are issued yearly. Subscriptions are accepted at $4.00 for six issues, postage paid, $6.00 for twelve issues, or $7.50 for eighteen issues. Published issues are available at seventy-five cents each through booksellers or by writing the publisher.

INDIAN AGENT
Sri Ramakrishna Math
Mylapore, Madras 4

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Pravrajika Anandaprana

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Printed in the United States of America

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Sri Rama Krishna Vivekananda Seva Nidhi
Shivala Mandir Srinagar Kashmir

FORMS OF THE DIVINE

SWAMI VANDANANANDA

IN VEDANTA a spiritual aspirant can choose to worship any one of many gods and goddesses and divine incarnations, always remembering that all these are varying aspects of Brahman, the one supreme being. Why are there so many forms of the divine in the spiritual practice of Vedanta? Because there are so many people in the world wanting different objects to love and worship, and Vedanta anticipates a liberal intelligent person's question, "Why limit man's choice in the spiritual field?" We all know that the divine, the Lord, is indefinable. If someone could tell us, "He is only this, and not that or anything else," and thus give us a clear-cut and yet complete definition of the divine, or if we could do this ourselves, then we probably would be in a position to accept the one form only and give up all other forms. But is this possible or is there a person who could talk from genuine personal experience and give us such a single and rigid conception of God? Neither Krishna nor Christ, neither Moses nor Mohammed, neither Buddha nor Ramakrishna has done this. They all speak of God's infinite manifestation and unlimited expression.

In some religious systems sometimes the claim is made that the form of the divine which they worship is the only right form and that all other gods and prophets are not true or genuine. They seem to say: "Worship this one form of the

divine. It only can save you. Why do you have to have so many forms?" To this, one from the Vedanta tradition could say: "Well, suppose I do not like the form you advocate? If you give one coat of a certain size to all and then insist, 'If it fits you, wear it and be happy; if it does not, then go without it and be unhappy forever,' you will be limiting God's glorious infinity and man's potential divinity." Vedanta wants to prevent such dogmatic exclusion of any sincere and serious devotee of God from the religious path. Why should anyone be left without a form of the divine, of his or her own choice, in order to think of God, love God, and meditate on God? If we are without some chosen form or symbol of the divine, our spiritual progress is retarded. For without form the divine is beyond human conception. And if God lies beyond our mental effort, our spiritual practice in our daily lives becomes more or less an empty formality.

Is ethical life without the divine practicable? We all know about leading a good life, that God is there, above us, somewhere, watching us, looking after us. But in the depth of mind and heart can we establish any intimate relationship with him? The Lord is watching, but where is he? We do not know. We only know of him from hearsay. And the proof that God is there is inferred from the supernatural law that provides us with rewards for doing good and punishments for being bad. But we never get to see him who bestows these rewards or punishments, and we never even ask questions about him. A dogmatic theologian is apt to say: "Do not ask about God, or what he looks like. Do good, and avoid evil. Follow ethical life, the right kind of life. You get rewards from the Lord because he is pleased." But a sincere spiritual aspirant may feel: "Why, the preaching priests, who have never seen God themselves, may have invented this dogma to make us live right! It looks like a trick. Otherwise why do they

discourage us from asking more and more questions about the Lord and about our desire to know him and contact him directly, intuitively?" To insist on the "good life" as an imperative, and yet declare that God is beyond our realization through his infinite manifestations is to defeat the very purpose of the good life. If man is looked upon as a born sinner, a small creature, he can never become one with God. But union with the divine is the goal of true religious life. It is wonderful to be aware that the Lord is watching over us, cares for us, and loves us. This is a great step towards the goal of complete union when we can talk to God and have constant recollection of and communion with him.

Yet, without God what is the point of ethical life? Why should we be consistently good? Yes, when we are in a group we should be good, because other people see us and we don't want to get a bad reputation. One can understand that. But when we are alone, when nobody is watching us, why should we be good in mind and at heart? When we are absolutely alone, what makes us feel, "I should be ethical; I should always think well of people; I should never have an evil thought"? What is the force, the motive, in my individual which makes him ethical when he is not in company, and not being watched? The Vedanta says man's relationship to the divine, the direct relationship of every individual with the Lord alone can make him truly ethical and righteous. Otherwise he will be acting in society, in groups, like an ethical man, but not so within. And that creates a split personality. The Lord, the divine, is present everywhere. If you are living a good life but do not associate it with God, in the long run ethics by itself will not satisfy you. We have to utilize forms of the divine and relate our ethics to them. In this way, we may think of ethical life as one more step in the spiritual evolution of man.

The modern idea of evolution accepts man as the highest. When you reach a human form, there seems to be a stop —we have evolved to the highest. So a human being should be fully satisfied. Yet, there is the urge to evolve more. Why? Let us investigate the evolutionary process, as described in Vedanta.

Vedanta first mentions inanimate life, such as rocks. It is still called life. For the Vedantist, everything is living. What is living in rocks? Apparently nothing; but Brahman is there. Brahman is everywhere, even in the seemingly inanimate life. So we start with Brahman in what we think to be dead matter. Next in the evolutionary process is plant life, the vegetable kingdom. It shows growth, but no extensive movement yet. Then we proceed to the animal kingdom. Animals show one more quality: movement, locomotion. In the animal, there is growth, there is movement, and there is mind. In the highest animal, man, there is motion, growth, mind, and one more thing which we call in Vedanta *buddhi*, the intellect. So, man is related essentially to all existence down to the rock, if you accept the evolutionary theory of Vedanta, which says Brahman is present in all.

But after we have reached a stage of intelligence, do we stop? No. For man again can be divided into three types: *tamas* (stupid, lazy), *rajas* (restless, passionate), *sattwa* (calm, pure). So after arriving at the human level, what is the next course of evolution? The Vedanta says it moves from tamas to rajas, from rajas to sattwa. No human should stop until he has reached the state of sattwa, which is tranquillity and light. Light does two things: first, it removes darkness, ignorance; then it gives joy. In the state of sattwa a person will have a clear intellect, fully lighted; and will have joy. He remains cheerful even when the elements of rajas or tamas try to pull him down. Not that he is always undisturbed. A

quality like sattwa can be disturbed by the other two qualities, but a sattwic person quickly regains his tranquillity and balance.

How do we progress from tamas to rajas, and from rajas to sattwa? Through spiritual practice. But you may ask, "Where is the Spirit in this process? You have not even mentioned the Spirit! You just said the intelligence of man should be made pure and perfectly tranquil and that is called sattwa; but where is the Spirit?"

Even the man of sattwa, having attained perfect tranquillity, has not reached the highest. The highest goal of human life is to see God, to be united with the Lord. That is what the Vedanta places on top of the evolutionary scale. You are really evolved as a human being if, having attained the state of sattwa, you go beyond all the gunas. For even this tranquil state is an egoistic state. But when you unite with the Lord there is no egoism left. That is the evolution we are aiming at through spiritual practice, and that is the Spirit. God is beyond our ordinary minds, but he is in us as Spirit. So the word Spirit in the Vedanta means Atman (God indwelling). We think of the Lord as both immanent and transcendent. He is the all-pervading one; he is present everywhere. But also he is the most intimate to every one of us. All religions speak of God as the ultimate goal. We have heard that mentioned time and again, and we try to move toward that ultimate. But he is also the most intimate.

How do we realize the truth within? Shall we be able to reach it? Is it within our range of accomplishment? A few have done it, but what about the rest of us? We want some experience, some feeling that it is possible: some kind of a hope. To that the spiritual teachers say, "All right, begin by

thinking of the Lord, who is the ultimate, as within you." We should practice thinking of him in one of three ways, or two, or all three ways:

(1) Think of him as the *Kalpataru*. In Vedanta, the Kalpataru means one who gives you whatever you want: the wish-fulfilling tree. This is a mythological tree. You stand under it and ask for what you want, and you get it. Similarly you can get whatever you want from God. You may ask for something pleasant, but within two days it may be a little painful. If you ask for such a thing, the Lord fulfills your desire. For the responsibility of asking is on you. By taking this attitude toward the Lord: "He is the one I shall turn to for whatever I want," you get closer to him. Whatever desire comes, you have to ask of him. The idea is to bring the mind to divine consciousness directly. Make the Lord the most intimate one to you, wherever you are, alone or in a crowd. You begin by asking for many things, but later on you will not ask for as much. And as you progress your desires change; your demands differ. As you move from tamas to rajas, you ask for less, and when you really come up to the sattwic state and you get closer to the Lord, you are surprised at yourself that you ask him for devotion and knowledge. You don't have the need for anything else. Therefore begin by thinking of him as the wish-fulfilling tree.

(2) Think of him as the one who is our innermost being. What is the effect of such an approach? Many thoughts arise within us and we believe not a soul has known of them. Thoughts appear and disappear constantly and we forget them. But the Lord knows about them. He is our innermost being. Look at the advantageous position the Lord is in! You cannot escape him. Whatever thought you have, good or bad, the Lord knows about it, because he is your innermost being. You may hide your thoughts from everybody else, but

not from the Lord. This awareness brings purity of heart.

(3) Think of the Lord as one who is full of all the blessed qualities you can imagine. Not the pleasant qualities, but the good and noble ones. Where is "good" personified? In the Lord. He is present within you as the repository or treasury of all the good qualities that you can conceive of. Ordinarily, although we possess whatever is good, we keep looking for it outside. Why? We want to see an example. Where is the glowing example? If we can see that, we feel happy. We are seeking for ideal goodness, ideal love, and the ideal human being. But the Lord is inherent in the ideal, and he is also in you as the real.

The idea that you have the Lord within you makes every thought become related to him. How? Any thought, as you know, is more or less related to matter. And what is matter? Name and form. Can you think of anything which has no objective relation, which has no form in your mind, or no name? You cannot. Even an "idea" has a picture, a form. Any thought that comes into the mind has a form and a name. When we are told, "Think of the Lord within your heart," we try, and then we say, "What is the Lord like? How shall we think of him? What is his name, or has he a name? We have been using the words 'Lord' and 'God,' but is there anything that is his own name?" The saints of all religions answer with their own experiences. They say, "Do you want to know the name and the form of the Lord, as we have realized him? We shall tell you." So we have in every religion, and especially in Vedanta, the name and form of the divine, of the supreme being, available to every one of us. Think of the Lord as the innermost being. At the same time, know his name and form. It helps the mind to settle down. There is no more vagueness or blankness in the mind. One feels, "Here I have something to think about, related to the divine."

Now when you go to find a name and a form as realized by the saints of different religions, you may meet with a variety of religious experiences, ten saints that have had ten types of experience. It is natural, for we are all different, and the forms we envision, the experiences we have, are different. A beginner asks, "Well, then, shall I think of any form I choose, or who decides what form I should pray to?" Do you really want help? Then go to a guru, a teacher. Here is a person who can study your mind and tell you in advance what form of the divine you must concentrate on. The one to whom spiritual life is really important will not hesitate to go to a teacher and find the truth. He will not go on struggling in the wilds and avoiding help.

Most of us privately recognize the fact that we do not know how to proceed in spiritual life. Therefore we should get instructions. And what does the guru do? With all the forms before you he helps you select a "chosen ideal." Then you worship and meditate on this form of the divine which you know is not something which people have invented. It is one of the forms which have been divinely revealed and traditionally accepted. It is real; it is genuine.

Cultivate that form and name of God at the time of meditation, during prayer, or any time. With a name and a form to focus on, the mind gains concentration. Gradually, you have a divine relationship established within you. This chosen ideal is the innermost being; he is father, he is mother, he is your closest companion. Whenever you are in need of him, he is with you. That is the best way spiritual progress can be assured. Otherwise people may go through many kinds of practice, but how are they sure of what they are doing?

How fast can we progress? Suppose a little progress is attained in five years. Does it prove that spiritual life is no good? The guru will say, "Carry on, with patience, another

five years." But you feel you have to set a limit. You say, "Well, I shall try for two more years, and if nothing happens I'll conclude it is no good." Swami Brahmananda told some of his disciples, "All right, set a limit, but follow the correct method, the method that will insure you some accomplishment, not just anything that you like. And if you don't succeed after following the prescribed method, come back and take me to task." So to be properly guided in spiritual life, the teacher is again the best book, the best of everything. Always refer to him.

The teacher gives the aspirant the chosen ideal, and the form and name of the divine. As the latter practices, what happens to that form in relation to all the other forms of the divine? Suppose one worships Ramakrishna; another worships Buddha; another worships Jesus Christ. All forms of the divine relate to the one Divinity. This is very important. We want to think of the Lord as expansively as possible. But it involves a natural and gradual process of the human mind.

Most of the time the mind seems to be scattered among ideas. But constantly there exists an inner question: "What is the *ideal* in life? What is the ideal for me? Where shall I go from here?" When a man has arrived at the stage where he is asking for an ideal, what do you tell him? Tell him the ideal is God-realization, union with God. The mind must find a way to that realization. After the ideal is decided upon, the mind asks for the "idol"—the hero, the one to whom it will be attached: namely, the form of the Lord. At the stage where people have ideals but do not find the proper "idol" they will begin to deify the wrong things and identify them with their ideals. Therefore we need an "idol" or symbol to worship. That is why we have in Vedanta what many people mistakenly call "idol worship." Idol worship simply means symbolism, and symbols must be rightly chosen or they may

mislead us completely. When you worship a picture, a statue, or a clay image, the Vedanta wants us to make sure that we do not get overly attached to the picture or the material object. The mind has to be lifted from the material to the spiritual. Vedanta gives the idol and at the same time tells us to do a ritual which makes us remember the One beyond the idol, the One which this idol represents. During the worship you place the Lord within and without. So the form of the divine, outside, in the material form, helps you to get the form well established inside. The ideas of the divine bring us to our ideal. The realization of the ideal needs the use of the idol or symbol.

AFTER that, we come to what we call individual experience. Once you have experienced the Lord even a little when you meditate, you feel wonderful. He is in the heart. The form comes to you clearly. Whenever you want to think of him, by practice, the form of the divine arises within. After that you forget the idol, the shrine, everything outside. Why? You have him. What more could you want? Once you have the form clearly established in your mind, in meditation you become almost centered in the Self. This is a higher state than before—a withdrawing into the heart where only you and the Lord are present.

But do you stop there? No. The next step is from the individual to the universal. So these are the five steps: seeking and yearning give us ideas of the divine; from idea to ideal; from ideal to "idol" (or form); from the idol an indrawn gaze into the individual shrine of the heart; and from there we move to a universal concept.

It seems to be a big step: from the individual to the universal. But the form of the divine which you have in your

heart leads you to the formless. It is not a big step after all, for the Lord himself shows the way. Once you feel that the symbolic form is one with the divine, the symbol and the universal God are no longer separated. The chosen ideal is in fact the Infinite.

Suppose you touch the ocean, for instance, at Laguna Beach. You can truthfully say that you have touched the Pacific Ocean. Another, standing miles away, thousands of miles even, can touch the same Pacific Ocean. But it does not matter what part of it you touch or he touches, for this vast ocean is all one. The same thing applies to the Lord, to your form of the divine. If you can really touch it, very intimately, a vision will come. An opening will come in the intellect; it opens to reveal that you are touching the ocean of Supreme Divinity. All forms of the divine are various points of this one ocean of Brahman: *Sat-Chit-Ananda,* absolute existence, absolute knowledge, absolute bliss. All forms of the divine are but aids to the mind, that we may progress toward infinite realizations—that Truth is one, that God is one, and though one, is experienced in various ways.

VITAL QUESTIONS ON RELIGION ANSWERED

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA

Q. If God is present in everyone, how do you explain people like Hitler?

A. God dwells everywhere. God dwells in the heart of the tiger too, but that doesn't mean that you have to go and hug the tiger. It is just like this: The self-luminous sun is shining; but rain clouds have gathered and it seems to us that the sun has disappeared. Actually the clouds have not affected the luminosity of the sun; it continues to shine behind the clouds. Similarly, God dwells in a Hitler too and remains unaffected by the thoughts and deeds of the man. The man reaps the fruits of his karmas (the consequences of his thoughts and deeds), and suffers. But through such suffering his character will be purified, and in some life he will wake up and realize his divinity.

Q. Very often when Christian theologians or scholars try to compare Christianity with the other religions, particularly those of the East, they say that all of the religions have some truth in them; but there is the insistence that the other religions are man's attempt to reach God, while Christianity is God's movement down to man—God's attempt to reach

man. In other words, the implication is that the Eastern religions express primarily man's effort, opposed to God's initiative or grace which is so strongly emphasized in Christianity. Could you comment on this?

A. I am very glad you asked this question because this point is so often misunderstood. You know, in order to understand any religion one has to be *inside* it, under a teacher or guide. The knowledge of Brahman is imparted by the guru to the disciple. Otherwise it cannot be known.

Now, in regard to your question, let me quote from the Upanishads: "The Atman (the indwelling God) is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but whom the Atman chooses, by him is he attained." And the saints I have lived with in India, men and women who had seen God, each one of them taught us: The vision of God cannot be had by human efforts. It comes only through divine grace. My master often said: "Is God a commodity like potatoes that he can be bought with so much prayer or meditation?" So I don't see how people can claim that Hinduism minimizes the element of grace.

But here is the point: Self-effort is needed in order that the heart may be purified. Spiritual disciplines and practices help us to open our hearts to God's grace. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "The breeze of grace is always blowing; set your sail to catch it."

Q. How can we live successfully in the world but not be of it?

A. Everybody has to live in the world. We monks also have to live in the world. I remember a disciple once asked Maharaj whether anybody can find God while living in the world. Maharaj answered: "Where else would one live?"

But remember, let not worldliness attach itself to you. How to keep worldliness away from you? By attaching your mind to something greater, something higher. The only way to live in the world and not be attached to it is to attach yourself to God. Let your hands work, go about your business; but keep a part of your mind in God, knowing him to be the one reality, the eternal truth. He alone is your very own. We have to convince ourselves that there is one object of love, one being who really loves us—and that is the Lord. He is your very own. You belong to him. Have that awareness; then you can live in the world and nothing will touch you.

Q. Can you explain why the Lord will one day seemingly take an active part in our affairs and the next day, in a very similar situation, stay completely aloof?

A. Isn't it your own mind that changes? When you are in a good mood you think the Lord is taking an active part in your affairs, and when you are in a bad mood you think that he doesn't concern himself with your affairs at all. God is always the witness. He is indifferent to your merits or demerits. All he wants is your love. But how can you love God unless he gives you that love? He is very miserly when it comes to giving devotion. So you are in a dilemma. What to do? Weep before the Lord and pray that you may have pure love for him. That is the only way.

Q. In trying to practice discrimination and renunciation I find that enjoyment of anything outside meditation constitutes distraction and on such grounds should be avoided. Good-by to music, movies, and nonreligious books! Yet these things make me feel good and give me a sense of beauty, and the difficulty is that I don't yet enjoy my meditation. What to do?

A. What is meant by renunciation? The giving up of lust and greed. Renunciation becomes natural when we are able to keep our minds fixed in God constantly. But at the beginning of spiritual life it is impossible to compel the mind to think of the Lord always. Now struggle to think of God at least occasionally. Practice prayer and meditation; chant the name of God regularly. Then with every new effort the power to concentrate will grow and you will love to meditate.

In the meantime, what are you to do? You should have some relaxation. If the distractions do not rouse lust and greed, they are not bad and will not lead you away from God. So be practical. Hear good music, go to the movies, read non-religious books. If these things give you some peace and a sense of beauty, let them remind you of Him Who is Beauty Itself.

Q. Can a happily married couple find God and/or the Truth together?

A. Well, I don't see why not! I wish that all of you happily married couples may remain together happily. If you move together toward God, one can help the other. Marriage is an institution which provides opportunities to learn control and to be selfless. If both of you devote yourselves to God you will remain happy together, and surely you will realize the Truth.

In our Hindu scriptures there are many examples of householders who became great devotees. The ancient rishis, the seers of the Vedas and Upanishads, were married people.

Q. Swami, how can we learn to distinguish between what is the Lord's will and what is our will?

A. There is just one way. Do you feel the presence of God and remember him? If you do something and consider

it God's will and have forgotten God, then you may be sure it is your own will.

Q. How can we learn to keep the mind in God?

A. Practice! Try! Then one day you'll look at someone. Suddenly you'll think: There is the presence of God. You'll look at the sky and feel: Oh, there is God! Someone will be talking to you and you'll have the awareness: That's God's voice.

One can do this when one begins to fall in love with God. Then recollection of him comes automatically. Just as when you were young and you had a sweetheart. It was no trouble at all for you to think of him or her. Your mind did it automatically. In the same way, when your heart is filled with God you think of him.

Q. Must we try to keep the mind completely still in meditation?

A. Meditation is a struggle. The restless mind wants to run everywhere. A disturbing thought arises. Immediately you must raise a contrary thought. Desires come into the mind. Chant the Lord's name; that will drive them out. Perfect calmness and tranquillity—these come later.

Q. How can feelings of lust be controlled?

A. Keep your mind engaged in chanting the name of the Lord. If lust persists, go into your room and clap your hands and chant the name of the Lord loudly. This will free you from lust. Of course you have to have the desire to be free. Prayer is answered, but you must be sincere.

Q. How can we make ourselves want to meditate?

A. The secret is doing it. When the mind is concentrated

on a subject, interest arises. But it takes time. Once you begin to meditate regularly, you will find that there is joy in the thought of God. Practice! Practice!

Q. Why is it easier to meditate at certain hours of the day?

A. There are four times during the day and night which are considered especially conducive to meditation: dawn, midday, sunset, and midnight. At these hours, nature takes on an attitude of calmness. Take advantage of these hours whenever you can.

But after all, where do we meditate? In our own minds. Therefore, any time you meditate is beneficial. Later on you will be successful in your meditation wherever and whenever you meditate. But in order to reach the stage where you can become absorbed in God regardless of external circumstances, it is very important that you practice the spiritual disciplines regularly at the same time every day.

Q. What meaning can spiritual awareness have for a middle-aged person?

A. Middle-aged or old—it makes no difference if there is the desire for spiritual life. And if the desire arises, no matter at what age, you are blessed. I know this from personal experience.

Many years ago, in India, an old man who had lived a very wayward life arrived at our monastery and said: "I want to stay here. Give me a room and some food." Everything he owned he had just handed over to our abbot. After some time my master came to visit our monastery. When he saw this old man he turned to me and asked: "Where did you find this saint?"

So, middle age or old age, it doesn't matter if you want

God. After all, where is God? He is within you, he is your very Self. Sri Ramakrishna expressed it so positively. He said: "Everyone can realize God, because God is the Self in every being." But you have to want to know the Self.

Q. How can fear be overcome?

A. It is very difficult. We fear so many things for so many reasons, imaginary and real—and most of the time imaginary. We fear things that will never happen. A man becomes fearless when he has the love of God in his heart. We have a saying in India: "Fear is fearful to approach Him."

Q. Are there any particular disciplines that can lessen fear?

A. The only discipline I know is to keep the mind fixed in God. In order to fix your mind in God, chant his name as often as you can. When you think of God you are in the sanctuary. Nothing can touch you.

Q. When you chant the Name, should you also keep the vision of the Chosen Ideal before you?

A. That's the best way—think of him and of his presence as you chant the name of God.

Q. Is it permissible to chant scriptures silently during meditation time since this is an aid to focusing the mind, or must we control the mind purely by an effort of will?

A. Try to control the mind by any feasible methods or means.

Q. Does the Lord give you the grace of your own mind?

A. What is the grace of your mind? It is the desire to

struggle in order to unfold the divinity within. A little struggle is necessary. Unless you take one step toward the Lord he does not stir. But take one step, and the Lord comes down a hundred steps toward you. So, self-struggle is very important.

Q. Can one incarnation of God be greater than another?

A. One divine incarnation may manifest greater power than another, according to the needs of a particular age. But remember, it is always the same God, the one supreme Spirit, who comes to re-establish his truth.

Q. Does art have a place in yoga?

A. Everything has a place in yoga if you use it in order to realize God. Yoga means union with God. If you make art a means of worship, then it will lead you to yoga.

Sri Rama Krishna Vivekananda

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SHANKARA

T. M. P. MAHADEVAN

AMONG the pathfinders to the Eternal, Shankara stands pre-eminent. He spent his entire life—short though it was—in urging his fellow men to turn from the ephemeral to the abiding, from the fleeting panorama of temporal life to the spiritual felicity of the life eternal. So far as earthly living and its demands go, there is no distinction between men and animals. Shankara gives expression to this fact aphoristically thus: *pashvadibhish cha avisheshat* ("As there is no distinction from beasts," etc.) and goes on to explain that there is no difference between the behavior of men and that of animals so long as the moving factors are appetition and aversion, and activity consists in a going forth towards the external sense objects. But man is endowed with a certain other characteristic which, if properly cultivated, will make for a distinction. Shankara defines this characteristic as the eligibility for karma, willed action, and jnana, knowledge, and cites in this connection a scriptural text which says, "The Atman is expanded only in man. He, indeed, is most endowed with intelligence. He gives expression to what is known. He sees what is known. He knows what is to come. He knows the visible and the invisible worlds. He perceives the immortal through the mortal. Thus is he endowed. But with the other animals, eating and drinking alone constitute their knowledge." It is because of this special endowment of ability to discriminate and discern the truth that birth as a human being is said to be

precious (*jantunam nara-janma durlabham*). It is in virtue of this endowment that man quests for the eternal, and eventually succeeds in gaining it.

Explaining the first word *"atha"* (then) in the first aphorism of the Brahma Sutra, Shankara sets forth the qualifications that would make one eligible for the quest eternal. The qualifications are: discrimination of the eternal from the noneternal, nonattachment to the finite enjoyments of this world as well as of the other, the possession in abundance of virtues like calmness and equanimity, and a longing for liberation. The first of these is the initial qualification that is essential for the Vedantic inquiry to start. At this stage, discrimination does not mean the final knowledge of the truth. It only implies that philosophical attitude which refuses to be deceived by the first look of things. What blinds the vision is narrow attachment to selfish enjoyments. These may pertain to this world or to the heavenly world. The mind longs for them and so is unable to see the truth. When it is in the grip of passions such as appetition and aversion, it cannot understand even empirical truth, and so it goes without saying, says Shankara, that the mind needs must be thoroughly cleansed before it can realize the truth of the inner self. The mind that has been freed from passions should then be strengthened by the cultivation of the cardinal virtues. The right attitudes must take the place of the wrong ones. Rid of its defects, the mind must acquire the excellences. It is then that the aspiration for release will firmly get established in the mind. This aspiration should not be confused with any passionate desire. Explaining the point, Sureshvara, Shankara's disciple, says that the longing for the supreme happiness which is release is not attachment: if this be attachment, then the wish for solitude, etc. should also be so, which is not the case.

Release which is regarded as the highest value is the

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same as the supreme Self which is the sole reality, according to Shankara's Vedanta, known as Advaita. It is this reality that is referred to in the Upanishads by such terms as Atman and Brahman. One may deny everything else, but not the Self, for it is the very nature of the one who denies. In the empirical world it appears as limited and as many. As conditioned by the psychophysical complex called the body and by the things that constitute the world, it is spoken of as "experience" (*anubhava*). When these conditions are removed it is known as the Self. Thus says Bharatitirtha, a distinguished Advaita-teacher of the fourteenth century: We wrongly imagine that the Self is the subject of transmigration and that the world in which this happens is real. The truth is that the Self neither rises nor sets, that it is the one constant consciousness which is self-luminous. The Self that is nondual and eternal is the substitute of the pluralistic universe which is an appearance of maya. Maya veils the real and projects the non-real. It is through the sublimation of maya that the illusion is overcome and the true Self realized.

Self-realization is *moksha* (release); in fact, the Self itself is moksha. This is not what is to be newly gained or accomplished afresh. It is the eternal nature that remains unrecognized on account of ignorance. The Self is eternal, not in the sense of the perpetuity of a flowing river: nor in the sense in which the denizens of the heavenly world, the gods, are said to be immortal because of their long life: the Self is absolutely eternal. Moksha is its very nature, and so it is *nitya* (eternal) and *anarabhya* (what is not begun).

It is because moksha is the eternally accomplished end that Shankara maintains as against the Mimamsaka-ritualist that action is not the means to it. Anything that is wrought by action is bound to perish. Through action one of four results may be obtained: origination, attainment, purification,

and modification. Release is different from all of these. The Self which is of the nature of release is not what is originated, attained, purified, or modified. That which obstructs the realization of the true nature of the Self is nescience: and this can be removed only by knowledge. The opposition between knowledge and action, says Shankara, is unshakable like a mountain (*jnana-karmanor virodham parvatavad akampyam*). It is only to the one that is nonattached to works and their fruit and takes to the path of knowledge that the Self which is Brahman is revealed. The path itself consists of study, reflection, and meditation, *Shravana, manana,* and *nididhyasana.* The knowledge that is aimed at through this process is not mere intellectual understanding but intuitive and direct experience. The competence to tread the path of knowledge is gained by the performance of one's duties without attachment to results (karma yoga), constant and undivided devotion to one's chosen form of the Deity (bhakti yoga), and the discipline of mental concentration (dhyana yoga). Possessed of this competence, when one pursues the path of inquiry to its end, the knowledge of the nondual Spirit dawns, even as the sun rises at the termination of the night. The analogy of sunrise is particularly apt because what really happens is not the rising of the sun but the removal of the obstruction that prevented the sight of the sun. Similarly, the moment ignorance is dispelled through knowledge, the Self stands self-revealed. It is this that is called moksha. One need not wait for realizing it till death overtakes the physical body. Even while tenanting a body one is released at the onset of knowledge. Such a one is called a *jivanmukta.* From his standpoint, there is no body at all. He seems to live in a body only for the unreleased. After a time when the body dies, we say "He becomes liberated from the body" (*videhamukta*). But, the truth is that there is no difference in moksha. When release

is attained, there is no further travail for the soul. It realizes its nondifference from the Absolute, which is called *advaita-anubhava* (experience of nonduality). "When all the desires that the heart harbors are gone," declares the Upanishad, "then the mortal becomes immortal, and attains Brahman even here."

To Shankara goes the credit of consolidating Advaita and of making it clear beyond doubt that, according to this philosophy, there is no need for final despair, no ground for ultimate doubts. No one may be barred from the quest eternal, for it is the common birthright of all. Distinctions may be meaningful in regard to other disciplines and practices such as ritual acts. But as regards Brahman and Brahman-knowledge, there could be no distinction based on time, place, and circumstance. Just like the great ones such as the sage Vamadeva of yore, says Shankara, we the moderns too, though weaklings, have a right to and can know Brahman.

THE STORY
OF MIRA'S LOVE

SWAMI BUDHANANDA

THERE is a small but tremendous word in the English language which in its all-pervasive import spans the meaning of life. It is understood and cherished by all people everywhere in the world, whatever may be their stage of evolution in the scale of civilization, or in the intricate domain of (animal and) carnal passions and human sentiments. It is the motive-power which drives both the sinner and the saint and is the cause of suffering and joy, comedy and tragedy, bondage and liberation.

That word is "Love."

Everybody—of any age, of any nation, of any color, of any religion or no religion, of any politics—talks of love. Everybody seeks to love and be loved. Even God is not excluded from this. Those who know God from personal experience have said that God's soul-hunger is infinitely more intense than the soul's God-hunger.

Jalalul Din Rumi, the great Sufi mystic, gives us the feel of this truth when he says:

> When in this heart the lightning spark of love arises,
> Be sure this love is reciprocated in that heart.
> When the love of God arises in the heart,
> Without doubt God also feels love for thee.

In his powerful poem "The Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson speaks of this quest of God for man's soul:

> I fled Him down the nights and down the days
> I fled Him down the arches of the years;
> I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
> Of my own mind.

But with all his racing speed and skill of evasion, he could not escape "From those strong feet that followed and followed after."

Meister Eckhart says beautifully:

> Earth cannot escape the sky; let it flee up or down, the sky flows into it, and makes it fruitful whether it will or no. So God does to man. He who will escape Him only runs to his bosom; for all corners are open to Him.

Now, how did this extraordinary love affair, which in its unimaginable sweep involves not only the entire creation but also the creator, begin?

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (I. IV. 3) we read:

> In the beginning, this universe was the Self alone in the shape of a person. He reflected and saw nothing else but His Self. . . . He was not at all happy. Therefore a person is not happy when alone.
>
> He desired a mate. He became the size of man and wife in close embrace. He divided this body into two. From that arose *Pati* and *Patni,* husband and wife. There (as Yajnavalkya said) the body (before one accepts a wife) is one half of oneself, like the half of the split pea. Therefore this space is indeed filled by the wife. He was united with her. From that union human beings were born.

In whatever light we may take this statement in the Upanishad, what we are expected to understand is that love is *Urdhvamulam;* it is, as it were, a creeper with roots in heaven. The source of love is the ultimate reality. It flows from God to creation. Again when this love is manifested in creation, in whatever form it may appear, in the ultimate analysis it is a movement from the creature to the Creator.

There are loves and loves. Loves covered with mud and filth, lost in sensuality and animality; and love crystal and iridescent, rising heavenward like a golden flame on wings of supersensuous flight, arousing ecstasy in God's own heart. No love is so fallen as will be completely bereft of the hidden touch of the Divine.

The reason for this is explained in those famous passages of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

> Verily not for the sake of the husband, my dear, is the husband loved, but he is loved for the sake of the Self (which in its true nature is one with the Supreme Self.)
>
> Verily, not for the sake of the wife, my dear, is the wife loved, but she is loved for the sake of the Self.
>
> Verily, not for the sake of the sons, my dear, are the sons loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self.
>
> Verily, not for the sake of wealth, my dear, is wealth loved, but it is loved for the sake of the Self.

Thus continuing, Yajnavalkya, the great seer, instructs his wife Maitreyi that nothing in this world is loved for its own sake but for the sake of the Atman or the Self.

With this instrument of love God's creation is perpetuated, and souls are kept bound. The greatest use, how-

ever, that can be made of love is to take it back to its source, which is God, and capture God himself with the instrument of love. All other loves only increase your hunger and thirst, and leave you sometimes low and sometimes high, sometimes morose and sometimes frustrated. As the Holy Mother, Sri Saradamani Devi, says, the heart's innermost love should be given only to God. From all other loves comes affliction. It is only the love for God that can assuage the insatiable hunger and thirst of our souls for all time, because God is the very source of love.

This all-powerful instrument of love has been used by aspirants down the centuries to realize God. In the devotional scriptures of the Hindus one reads that love has been used in five different *bhavas* or attitudes, namely:

Shanta, the serene attitude of the seers of olden times. A quiet-flowing love, like the single-minded devotion of a wife to her husband.

Dasya, the attitude of the servant to the Master, like that of Hanuman to Sri Rama, as one finds in the *Ramayana,* the great Hindu epic.

Sakhya, the attitude of friendship—"Come here and sit, and share this fruit," which the friends of Krishna used to have for him.

Vatsalya, the attitude of the mother toward her child, like the love of Yashoda for Krishna.

Madhura, the sweet attitude of a woman toward her paramour, or of a bride to the bridegroom.

Of all these attitudes, in the last mentioned, the madhura bhava, are compounded all the other four attitudes. That is to say, this attitude of love for God can be considered to be more powerful than all the others because it includes

the entire gamut of love. "God as Lord is feared; God as father is revered; God as master is honored and served; God as Beloved and Beautiful is embraced." This union and communion of the soul with the oversoul is known in Hindu religious literature as the consummation of madhura bhava. It has also been called "bridal mysticism." The gopis, or cowherd maidens in the *Bhagavatam,* established an ideal of supreme devotion to the Lord for all posterity to wonder at.

In the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (21) it is said:

> Verily it is indescribable—*parabhakti,* the highest form of devotion to Lord Krishna—it is seen manifest in the lives of the gopis of Vrindavan.

This love which is steeped in erotic imagery has often been an object of criticism by those who, to say the least, did not understand what they were criticizing. It requires a highly evolved devotee to penetrate to the heart of the supreme devotion of the gopis and to be able to understand its pure and superior character.

Uddhava, the great devotee, says in the *Bhagavatam*:

> I worship the gopis who in their infinite love for Sri Krishna renounced their all in the world, broke the unbreakable shackles of family life. I wish I were reborn in Vrindavan as a plant so that the dust of their feet may fall on my head and purify me.

"Bridal mysticism" has not been the monopoly of Hinduism. The theory of spiritual marriage in Christian mysticism is an identical concept. The key to this way of loving God was introduced in Christianity by Christ him-

self in his parable of the ten virgins and the Bridegroom.

The idea of spiritual marriage, or the gopis' way of love, was successfully cultivated by mystics like St. Bernard, Jan van Ruysbroeck, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa. One cannot read their lives without being convinced how all-consuming was the love of the Bridegroom.

IN India, the exalted woman mystic Mirabai is one of the finest examples in history of this all-consuming love for God. The very utterance of the name of Mirabai fills the Hindu mind with inspirational devotion.

In Mira India saw the gopis' devotion to Krishna, resurrected and revivified in the great spiritual tradition.

Though Mira's songs are sung everywhere in India by millions of people, in temples and monasteries, wayside inns, and even in movies, we do not yet have a universally accepted version of her life. Research is going on. Here we shall follow a version which appears to be more acceptable than others for various reasons.

Mira was born the daughter of Ratan Singh in the early 1500's, at Kudki village in a royal kshatriya family of Rajasthan, an area of Central India. Many of the heroic sagas of Indian history flow out of the life of these sturdy people, the Rajputs, who lived in Rajasthan.

In this martial race of the desert regions a new type of blossom was Mira, heroic, not on the battle front, but heroic in devotion, in self-abandonment at the feet of the Lord.

When Mira was three or four she seized upon the idol of her life from whom no power on earth could separate her. One day a venerable monk came to her father's home and stayed overnight as guest. The monk carried an image of

Giridhara (a name of Sri Krishna) for his daily worship. During his stay at Ratan Singh's house, while he was worshiping the deity, little Mira felt irresistibly attracted to the idol, and wanted to make it her own.

But the monk was not at all ready to part with the image of his chosen ideal which he had so long worshiped. Mira threatened to fast—the power of the aggression of this small girl's love was felt. The monk, however, was ready to give away anything he had, but not the idol of his heart.

In this duel of love Mira became victorious, for the Lord himself indicated in a dream preference for Mira. And the monk bent sadly over the image, and with trembling hands gave it to Mira, wiped his eyes, and wended his way in the vastness of the world, musing on the strange ways of the Lord.

Readers of the life of Sri Ramakrishna will remember how in a very similar way Jatadhari, a Vaishnava monk, who had come to stay for a few days at Dakshineswar, had to leave behind the idol of his life, Ramlala, because the deity had expressed a preference for Sri Ramakrishna.

The mysterious telepathy that transpires between the Lord and his chosen devotees is not comprehensible to us. But let us not depend too much on our little discursive intellect and reject such phenomena disrespectfully only because we do not understand them. Most mystic experiences happen beyond the bounds of reason.

You can imagine how great was Mira's joy at the triumph of her fancy. But perhaps you cannot imagine that this image of Giridhara could become the center and sole joy of her life.

Children are clever creatures. They know very well how to extract toys from the unwilling hands of parents

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by just twisting their lips and shedding a few tears. Mira was more aggressive and assertive, and what she got she did not throw away as children do with toys when their interest wanes.

One day after this incident, when a marriage procession was passing by their home, little Mira asked her mother most anxiously, "Mother, where is my *dulaha*?" The bridegroom is called "dulaha." The word also means the beloved. "Giridhara Gopala is your dulaha," said her mother, pointing at the image and smiling at the innocence of the child. But the mother perhaps also remembered what little Mira had told her of a dream in which she was married to the Lord of the Universe.

However, the seriousness with which the child had taken her mother's words was revealed, to the bewilderment of many, as she grew up. The language of her heart was recorded in her song later on:

I have none else for my husband
But Giridhara Gopala,
On whose head shines the crown
Of peacock feathers.
He is my husband.

When Mira was about eight her mother died, and she came to live with her grandfather Dudaji who was a devout Vaishnava, a worshiper of the supreme Lord in the form of Vishnu. At her grandfather's knee Mira listened to the spiritual lore of the land, like the Mahabharata, with rapt attention.

As far as she was concerned Mira knew she was already married to Giridhara Gopala. But nobody else took the marriage seriously. When Mira was about thirteen her

father gave her in marriage to the Prince Bhojraj, the son of Maharana Sanga, King of Mewar, whose capital was at the city of Chittore.

Coming to live in her husband's home, Mira disappointed almost everybody. When, according to the family tradition, she was taken to the family shrine, where the Divine Mother was worshiped, Mira declared that she did not offer obeisance to anyone but Giridhara. This startling defiance could not be understood by her new relatives. Was Mira insane, or a bigot? To the family she appeared irreverent and arrogant.

The mind of the mystic of Mira's type does not function in an ordinary way. She was passing through a stage when to her the real and spiritual marriage with Giridhara was superseded by a somewhat unnecessary and unreal marriage with a prince, for whom she had little need or love. She was already committed to one husband, her God and her all, who was Giridhara Gopala. At this moment of high tension she found the necessity of making obeisance to another deity like a denial of her loyalty. How could she, whose heart was given away to one, have any worship to offer to another? Or what was the point of offering obeisance when the devotion was for someone else? Would it not be hypocrisy?

Another reason for the disappointment of the family was that Mira did not bring with her any of the usual worldly yearnings of a young bride. In Rajput families, which were specially devoted to the cultivation of rajas, young women were not expected to be ascetics, but objects of pleasure, physical and mental. But Mira was totally of a different type. After marriage, her devotion to Giridhara increased and most of her time was spent in prayers and songs before the Lord. And she invited monks and holy

men and had religious discourses with them. None of her ways were liked by the family.

Mira was ordered to abandon her own ways and follow the conventions of the royal household, but she could not easily conform. The spiritual yearning in her heart was so keen that it was difficult for her to tread the ordinary household path.

So disciplines were imposed on her. Mira, however, reacted in her own way, and she sang in a song:

> All the dear ones of this household are creating trouble over my association with holy men and are causing great hindrance to my worship. From childhood Mira made Giridhara Nagara her friend and beloved; this attachment shall never be broken but shall flourish.

WHEN Mira was about seventeen, her husband Bhojraj passed away. In some literary works on Mira, Bhojraj is depicted as a jealous husband, who out of spite against his wife's devotion for God—which deprived him of the sweetness of his conjugal life—treated her badly. In some other works this is emphatically contradicted, and Bhojraj emerges as a somewhat melancholy figure who loved his wife dearly, but did not get adequate response, for Mira had given herself completely to the Lord.

In any case, after the passing away of her husband a new chapter opened in Mira's life. It was certainly the most trying period of her life and most fruitful too. It is said that at this time, Mira received spiritual initiation from a monk, Raidas, by name. Her widowhood, by itself, could only mean for her intensification of spiritual life. Now after receiving initiation from a spiritual teacher her spiritual

yearning and absorption, her longing for holy company, her utter disregard for the conventional ways of the world —all increased a thousandfold and created difficulties for her.

Meanwhile her father-in-law Rana Sanga passed away, and Prince Vikramaditya, also known as Vikramjit, became the Rana or ruler at Chittore. He wasted no time in extending disciplinary measures to Mira.

Mira's devotional practices were uniquely her own. She danced and sang before Giridhara Gopala. And she would lose no opportunity of associating with holy men. Her yearning for holy association was so great that she set aside all conventions of the royal household in order to get the inspiration of spiritual company. This hunger for holy company was naturally not understood by those who had not undergone self-purification.

Vikramjit, the Rana, now passed orders that Mira should give up her unseemly singing and dancing before the image and the even more objectionable seeking of the company of holy men. Was she not a woman, a widow? Then why so much anxiety to meet with men? Vikramjit did not hesitate to spread scandal against this purest of pure women.

When Mira was obstructed in her worship in the palace, she went to a temple outside, and there continued her spiritual practices in her wonted manner. Her supreme devotion and ecstasies soon attracted attention, and from far and near people began to flock to her, to give homage and to receive spiritual inspiration. This angered the Rana and others in the household all the more. Mira was now virtually made a captive in the palace and one inhuman torture followed upon another.

Mira was not only a lover of God, but an inspired poet. Her poems, which she used to make song offerings

to the Lord, give an account of what she had to go through at the hands of the Rana. You will be surprised how tremendous were the oppressions, but how easily Mira went through them. In one song Mira records her experience:

Mira is happy in the worship of her Lord;
Rana made her a present of a serpent in a basket;
Mira, after her ablution, on opening it found
the Lord Himself.
Rana sent a cup of poison;
Mira, after her ablution, drank the cup
which the Lord had turned to nectar.
Rana sent a bed of nails for Mira to sleep on;
That night, when Mira slept on it,
It became a bed of flowers.

Mira's Lord averts all her troubles,
ever her kind protector;
Mira roams about in ecstasy of devotion.
She is a sacrifice to the Lord.

MYSTERIOUS and various are the ways in which God's grace flows through the lives of devotees. When Bernard Shaw heard the news of Gandhiji's assassination, he exclaimed, "This is the consequence of being a good man in this world!" Gandhiji was a devotee of Sri Ramachandra. When a few days before his assassination a bomb had burst in his prayer hall, and Gandhiji escaped unscathed, people thought, "Who can destroy him whom God protects?" But a few days later God refused to protect him from the assassin's bullet. Again, Prahlada of Hindu mythology, who was a boy devotee of Vishnu, could not be killed by being trampled under the foot of an elephant, or thrown from a hill top, or by being administered poison, or various other ways. The

Heavenly Father did not save Christ from being nailed to the cross. Nor did anyone stay the cup of hemlock from the lips of Socrates. But Giridhara Gopala saved Mira in all possible ways.

Ordinarily we are bewildered when we study the various consequences of being a true devotee of God. Our difficulty in understanding grace arises from the fact that we have a gross view of devotion as an investment. I have loved God—so he must now become my policeman, doctor, lawyer or a lifeboat for me whenever I am in trouble. As a cash-return for devotion, we want security bonds from heaven. This in religion is racketeering and commercialism taking the various forms of the promissory notes of "indulgences."

Thus, grace is present not only when the poison turns to nectar; it is also there when the poison works. The Lord's grace is there when the good man graciously takes the consequences of being good. Mira took the poison not because she was in any way sure that it would turn to nectar, but because whatever was sent came from the beloved. The proof of grace is in this God-given capacity for ready acceptance of whatever comes from the Lord; and from the standpoint of the devotee the consequences just do not matter. When Pavhari Baba, the great Indian saint, was smitten by a serpent he exclaimed, "Ah, a messenger from the Beloved!" Good and evil, pain and pleasure, prosperity and adversity, life and death—all are messages from the Beloved. When we do not see this dual throng of opposites as acceptable or unacceptable, but only as a conferring of love from the Beloved, we have tasted bhakti or devotion.

The proof of God's grace is not in any incident, favorable or unfavorable but in the God-infused strength of the soul, which can accept anything that comes with joy

and resignation. It is not in what comes, but how you are given to receive what comes.

VIKRAMJIT was a harsh, insensitive man, and he thought undependable Mira required strict vigilance. So he appointed his own sister Udabai—because he thought that he could not depend on others to do this delicate job faithfully—and three other women to keep watch over her. Uda tried her best to change Mira's mind and ways.

An interesting conversation between them has come down to us and gives us insight into Mira's unworldly and fearless character.

Uda: Mira, give up this company of holy men. There's scandal in the city.

Mira: Let them spread the calumny. What's that to me? I am devoted to holy men.

Uda: Why don't you wear your pearl necklace and your precious jewelry?

Mira: I have thrown them away. Holy thought and contentment are my ornaments.

Uda: At other places one sees beautiful processions and congregations of men and women—and at your place assemble only all sorts of devotees of God.

Mira: Go to the terrace of the palace and see how wonderful is the assembly of holy men.

Uda: All people of Chittore are ashamed of you; and the Rana hangs his head low.

Mira: Chittore is free today—the way for Rana's deliverance is also open.

Uda: Your parents are ashamed of you. You are the cause of stigma to your birthplace.

Mira: My parents are blessed. My birthplace is also blessed.
Uda: Rana is angry with you. And he has kept poison for you in the casket of gems.
Mira: That is fine. I shall drink it as the sacrificial water.
Uda: That is not ordinary poison. The very sight of it will kill you.
Mira: I have none in the world. Mother earth will accept me.
Uda: Ranaji wants to know what is your path and aim of your life.
Mira: My path is sharp as the razor's edge. Rana will not be able to reach that region.
Uda: Don't be disobedient to the Rana. Obey him. If he is angered there will be no shelter for you.
Mira: Uda, Giridharilal is my only refuge. I pray to him with all sincerity.

But Uda failed in her attempts to convert Mira to her way of thinking. Mira lived in her own world; threats or allurements of this world had little sway over her.

However a conversion took place, not of Mira but of Udabai. The touch of the philosopher's stone burned the base metal into gold. Vikramjit had much faith in Uda, for he thought the latter was his loyal follower. But holy company is an explosive thing. One day, forgetful of the world, alive only in her Lord, Mira was passionately singing this song:

> Since I have met Him, my friend, I have
> said good-by to all decorum and modesty;
> none pleases me—none can fetter me.
>
> Ah, the peacock crown He donned and
> the beautiful mark on His forehead!

Who in the three worlds can resist His
charm? All succumb to His enchantment.

As Uda listened to the outpouring of Mira's soul in her song and supplication, she experienced an inner transformation and fell at Mira's feet, asking to be taken as her disciple.

This was the end of one type of vigilance and beginning of another for Uda. Her transformation was instantaneous. Pining to have the vision of Giridhara, Uda begged Mira to get her that vision. Mira was by nature large-hearted; and she was so deeply moved at Uda's yearning that her heart swelled in prayer and she begged her Lord to fulfill Uda's yearning. It was midnight. Uda and her three companions, Mithula, Champa, and Chameli were all seated in the shrine, Mira was pouring out song after song in her celestial voice. To their utter amazement, all on a sudden Giridharalal appeared and said, "Mira, why are you so very deeply agonized tonight for me?" Such was the incredible fruit of holy company, that not only Uda but her three companions who had not specially craved for it all had the vision of the Lord.

Perhaps noticing that Uda was no longer trustworthy, Vikramjit appointed special guards to keep watch over Mira's temple day and night.

At long last Mira was caught. At midnight the guard brought the news secretly to the Rana that Mira was "frolicking" with a person in the temple. Sword in hand, the Rana rushed to the shrine and finding no one, asked Mira, "Where is the man with whom you have been frolicking all this while?"

"My beloved is there standing before you. Then why do you ask me?" replied Mira.

The angry and self-righteous Rana, however, unable to see the Lord, proceeded to make a special search, when to his utter fright and dismay he saw the horrible figure of a man-lion confronting him. Valorous Rana Vikramjit swooned on the ground, sword in hand.

And Mira herself was not a little surprised, because the same Giridhara, who was sporting with her as the Beloved, had now assumed this horrible form to frighten her tormentor.

For the Rana it was too shocking an experience. Therefore there soon came an order from the Rana, ostensibly to save the prestige of the family, that Mira must leave Chittore. This was an order of banishment. For a lady of the royal household it was not an easy order to obey, but inside, Mira was a revolutionary and did not care what was in store for her. Was not Giridhara her beloved and her refuge? Before leaving she sang for the Rana's household firmly and frankly:

> If the Rana is angry, what harm can he do to me? Friend, I shall continue to sing the glories of Giridhara. If the Rana is angry, his own kingdom will give me shelter; but if God is angry, my friends, where can I go? Friends, I care not to follow worldly conventions, and shall unfurl the banner of independence. I shall row the ship of God's name and will cross the illusory world. Friends, Mira has taken refuge with the powerful Giridhara and will cling to his feet.

MIRA left Chittore, and the very goddess of fortune was gone as it were, from the capital. Shortly after her banishment, the waves of invasion in Chittore by Muslim chiefs began, at the conclusion of which the city was reduced almost to a mass of ruins.

For a while Mira stayed with her uncle at Merta, but as political misfortune overtook him, Mira was compelled to leave Rajputana. Her Giridharalal had probably a fancy to see the lady of an ancient royal family standing and singing the glories of his name on the dusty roads of this earth. Mira was now a veritable beggar, a singing minstrel, moving from one place of pilgrimage to another. In this most trying situation her dependency on the Lord increased a hundredfold, and in a ringing voice she sang her immortal song of renunciation:

> Father, mother, brother, or friend, I have none—
> Lord, for your sake I have given up all happiness—
> Do not forsake me now! Do not forsake me.

On this pilgrimage, there were moments when she felt that she was forsaken by the Lord. This, in fact, was only her hunger for his perpetual vision, and so like a neophyte she would cry:

> Lord, will you not grant me your vision before life leaves this body?

Though now homeless, Mira was not, however, alone. Such was the power of her wonderful songs, steeped in devotion, that crowds would follow her wherever she went. The supernal beauty of her purity, the regal dignity of her person, her infinite humility, her fathomless devotion, her fearlessness, absolute surrender, and her transmuting songs, gave a new sort of experience, even in India. For even in India, which has produced so many saints, Mira is unique. Such absolute love for God and such absolute renunciation have been seen both before and since. But the outpouring

of Mira's divine passion in song has such a special character that even among the melodious mystics Mira stands out as a singular saint whose very name has become an inspiration to spiritual aspirants for all time. Nobody knows how many songs Mira sang in the privacy of her soul to her Lord. We have now some five hundred on record. This is a highly valued treasure in our spiritual lore. It is impossible to sing or to hear Mira's songs without having an influx of Mira's passion for God well up in one's heart.

Wandering in this melodious way, spreading everywhere waves of devotion and yearning for the Lord, Mira came to Vrindavan, the great place of pilgrimage for Vaishnavas. In his lifetime Sri Krishna's sport with the gopis was enacted in the sylvan surroundings of Vrindavan, and the gopis were the greatest devotees of Krishna, whom they worshiped in the madhura bhava, the attitude of the beloved to the sweetheart. That was exactly the attitude of Mira to Krishna. Some even used to hold the view that Mira had herself been a gopi in her previous life. You therefore can imagine her joy in being at the place where her Beloved had sported, in his incarnation as Krishna. It was not all joy, however, for the constant remembrance of Krishna agonized her heart beyond description and she pined for the constant vision of the Lord. When the devotees became aware of her extraordinary love for Krishna they began to throng around her for inspiration. Her devotional singing, or *bhajan,* attracted crowds.

Nor did Mira lose any opportunity of associating with holy men. At that time Jiva Goswami, the great disciple of Sri Chaitanya, was living in Vrindavan. Mira sought an interview with him. But the saint, a hyper-rigorous ascetic, refused to see Mira because she was a woman. On being refused an interview, Mira sent the monk a note which

brought him new enlightenment. She wrote: it was surprising that the revered saint had not yet transcended the sex-idea? And that in Vrindavan, Sri Krishna alone is Purusha, all others are Prakriti. If the saint considers himself as Purusha and not as a gopi, it is better if he leaves the sacred place, where Sri Krishna once sported. The saint at once recognized that he was encountering a person of higher enlightenment and deeper realization. Without loss of time he met Mira, paid her his obeisance, and begged pardon, while Mira paid her respects to him.

Now this requires explanation: why did Mira say that Krishna was the only male principle and all others (men and women) represented the female principle? In short, this idea means that the creator God alone is the directive, operative, and active principle; whereas all created beings, the jivas or embodied souls, are only receptive and responsive principles. The Creator is the source of all energy and the creation is the vessel and the manifestation of the energy. Thus a mystic may look upon God as the only male principle and all men and women as representing the female principle.

Moving about in joy from grove to grove in Vrindavan, the land of Krishna's divine play, Mira sang one of her most moving and famous songs:

Take me as your servant,
O my Giridhara, my beloved,
Take me as your servant.
I shall work as your gardener—
And in return shall have your vision.
I shall sing of your sport
In the bowers of Vrindavan.
For being your servant,
What a rich return I shall have:

Contemplation of your form,
Remembrance of your name,
Devotion to you—
Ah, what a rich return!
How beautiful is your form,
My darling with the peacock crown,
The garment bright as lightning,
The garland swinging on your breast.

O my cowherd boy,
O my flute player!
Daily I shall plant
New creepers to blossom for you,
And dressed in a yellow sari
I shall obtain the vision of you;
The yogi comes here to practice yoga,
The monk comes to perform austerity,
The mendicant comes to Vrindavan to worship God:
Inscrutable is the nature of Mira's Lord.
O my mind, have patience—
At the dead of night
On the bank of the River of Love
Your Lord will meet you.
Take me as your servant,
O my Giridhara, my beloved,
Take me as your servant.

From Vrindavan, after visiting Mathura and some other places of pilgrimage, Mira at last came to Dwaraka and settled there for the remaining period of her life. Like Vrindavan and Mathura, Dwaraka is also a place associated with Sri Krishna's life, and he is known there by the special name of Sri Ranacchorji. At the feet of the Lord, in the temple, Mira passed her days happily singing her songs. She learned Gujarati, composed songs in that language, and came to be adored by the local people as a saint with deep mystic experiences.

AFTER Mira had left the palace in Chittore, Mewar went through fire. Muslim invasion brought havoc to the entire kingdom. Chittore, the capital, was in a bad state, and Vikramjit, who during his rule had banished Mira from Chittore, was no longer the king. The new king, Udaisingha, was a God-fearing man, who realized that all their misfortunes were well deserved, for the royal family had ill treated saintly Mira. He lost no time in sending the most revered priest of the capital, along with some other dependable persons, to bring Mira back to Chittore from Dwaraka. But when they came to Dwaraka, notwithstanding their continuous, piteous, and persuasive requests, Mira refused to retrace her steps. She would not leave the feet of the Lord. What was Chittore to her? At last the messenger-priest took an extreme step and threatened a hunger strike, if Mira would not change her mind. This satyagraha of the priest perturbed Mira, for she could not see a man dying for her sake.

Helpless as she was, Mira entered the temple to take leave of Sri Ranacchorji, the Deity, and in piteous melody she sang two songs:

Lord, you are the remover of miseries of all beings.
O Giridharalal! Mira is your maidservant.
Where there is misery
There also is misery's remover.

The second song being:

O my good and beautiful one,
May your wish be fulfilled!
I have none else to be kind to me.
Without food during the day,
Without sleep at night,
My frame wastes away each moment.

O Giridhara Nagara, O my Lord!
Do not forget Mira,
May she be joined with you!

We are told that God takes seriously the prayers and supplications of souls that are pure and self-given. Mira's songs vibrated inside the temple and it would appear also inside the heart of the Deity, while ceaselessly the waves of the ocean broke on the seashore outside the temple. Mira was alone inside the temple with the Lord. Her plaintive melodies poured forth. The priest-messenger was waiting outside with his followers in the joyful expectation that they would ultimately be able to return to Chittore with the goddess of their fortune. The waves of the ocean rolled on. Time waited for none, and the door of the temple continued to stay closed.

When the door was finally opened from outside, the wonder was great indeed. Mira had vanished.

Sri Ranacchorji had not given her leave to go, he had taken her unto himself. Where did she or could she go? The temple was closed. The priest-messenger was sitting at the door. A thorough search inside yielded no results. Presently the plaintive sweet voice of Mira was heard singing the refrain of her last song:

O Giridhara Nagara, O my Lord!
Do not forget Mira,
May she be joined with you!

From where did the voice come? Was she hiding anywhere? Despite a search, Mira could not be found. She was not to be taken to Chittore, for she had returned to her eternal capital, the heart of the Lord. Mira, through the power of her love, had become physically resolved in the person of the Deity. The proof of this was revealed by the discovery of Mira's veil on the face of the Deity.

In the spiritual history of India there have been a few other cases in which the devotee became dissolved in the person of the Deity.

Andal, who was born with the same ecstatic love for Sri Ranganatha as Mira had for Giridhara Gopala, and refused to marry anybody else but the Lord, got dissolved, sucked, as it were, into the image of Sri Ranganatha at Sri Rangam. Her hymns, which are some of the most inspiring devotional lyrics in Tamil literature, are sung as a part of early morning devotions, especially in the months of December and January, everywhere in the Tamil-speaking areas of South India. It is also said that Sri Chaitanya, who was a contemporary of Mira, vanished in the same mysterious way in a temple in Puri. And a similar story is told about another celebrated Indian saint called Tukaram.

THIS is Mira's story, a life lived completely in search of God, with absolute and heroic unconcern for the world and worldliness; a life in which bridal love for God attained its astonishing fulfillment even as it did in the life of the gopis, a life from which flows an unending stream of inspiration to aspirants who tread the path of devotion to the Lord.

Mira is not just a heartbeat but the very soul-vibration of India. And why should one say "of India"? Mystics do not belong to any race. They belong to God as God belongs to them. Their true language is not just a spoken dialect but the yearning of the soul. Now, though we have narrated here all the known facts of her life, we must confess it is beyond our power to present the real Mira. For the real Mira is not the Mira of the happenings of her life, but the Mira of the hastening soul, the Mira of agony and suffering, of bleeding heart and scorched spirit; the Mira pining and prostrated by

separation from the Lord—and again the Mira of resurgence and beatitude in her union with the Lord.

If you want to have a glimpse of this real Mira, you must hear a musically gifted devotee of Krishna sing her songs with self-abandon. Then you will have a faint glimpse of the inner being of Mira. In her devotional songs Mira lives on. As we cannot conceive of the death of electricity, so we cannot conceive of the death of love. In bhakti (devotion), the bhakta (devotee) lives. Bhakti is not one-way traffic. It is a fusion of God's breath to the soul and the soul's response to it; it is the union of the bride with the bridegroom; it is the losing of oneself in the offered embrace.

At an early age Mira dreamed that the Lord had married her. She could even remember the imposing gate of the palace of God. From this time, when in reply to her question about her "dulaha," her mother had said that the deity Giridhara was her bridegroom, the one constant strain through her life was:

> I have none but Giridhara Gopala,
> On whose head shines the crown of peacock feathers.
> He alone is my husband and my Lord.

For this supreme union she had to pass through all sorts of travail which are reflected in her songs. She did not mince matters. She declared her love without hesitation. Her agony was too great to allow her the luxury of concern for anything else. It required her to be fearless, to be shameless, to be deprived of everything people hold dear in the world—home, security, prestige—and to undergo all sorts of oppression for the sake of the beloved. Even then he was not always to be seen. The love was given, but where was the lover? Mira's anguish knew no bounds:

My eyes ache for the sight of you;
Since you have left me, my Lord, I find no rest,
My bosom heaves at your name, your sweet name!
With gaze fixed on your path, I await your return.
The night seems long as half a year.
Oh, to whom shall I tell the pangs of my separation?
Friends, I feel as if a knife is cutting my eyes,
When will you meet me, O Lord of Mira,
You who bestow joy and allay pain?
For you, night after night, I keep vigil
And make the same lament.

In many of her songs Mira thus pours out her flaming agony—her unmitigated yearning for the Lord. There are other songs in which she delineates the sport of the Lord, and in some of them there is an inspiring description of nature and supplication as an aspirant. Some songs are autobiographical and in others she gives hints for spiritual life. After long separation and suffering there came the great moment of joyous union. And she sang:

Friends, my beloved has come home:
After long separation and agony
I have been united with my beloved.
I have greeted him with the waving of a light.
Ah, this return of the beloved,
In all his grace!
Let us sing the song of the joy of union,
The boundless joy.
My eyes swim in the ocean of his beauty.
Mira's courtyard is gay today.

Mira's bliss could not be taken away from her; her union could not be broken. So she confidently sings:

All-pervading one,
I am dyed with your color.

When other women's sweethearts
Live in foreign lands,
They write letter after letter.
But my beloved lives in my heart,
So I sing happily day and night.

After coming through so many trials and such anguish Mira could at last declare almost triumphantly without the least trace of vainglory:

I am true to my Lord:
Why should I feel ashamed,
Now that I have danced in public for my beloved?
I lost all appetite in the day,
And all sleep at night;
Now the arrow of love has pierced me,
And I have begun singing of the knowledge divine;
Therefore my relatives have all come,
And are sitting round me like bees sipping honey.
Mira, the slave of Giridhara,
Is no more the laughingstock of the world.

In a beautiful song Mira gives in arresting language the testament of her faith:

I have none but Giridhara Gopala,
On whose head shines the crown of peacock feathers,
He alone is my husband and my Lord.
Father, mother, brother, and kinsman—
None are mine.
I have flung aside my pride of family,
What harm can anyone do to me?
By keeping company with saints,
I have lost all worldly shame.
I have torn my veil of many hues
And covered myself with coarse apparel;
Pearls and corals I have cast aside
And put on a garland of forest flowers.

With my tears I have watered the creeper of love.
Now that the creeper has thickly spread,
Its fruits shall be joy itself.
With great devotion I have churned milk,
And butter I have collected;
He who wants may have the whey.
I was born for devotion's sake,
But the sight of the world made me captive.
O Lord Giridhara, save me now,
Says Mira, the maidservant.

That joy, that butter of life-spiritual, which Mira collected with great devotion, waits to be yours, if you would seek it, for your own joy, for your own bliss, for your own good.

WHAT VEDANTA MEANS TO ME

CLIVE W. JOHNSON

I AM merely a beginner on the path to self-knowledge. I suppose I consider myself, in all humility, a thoughtful person; hence, I try to devote a good deal of my time to a thoughtful appraisal of this life, to which our flesh binds us.

Vedanta has forced me to a rather harsh conclusion: life, as the majority of us live it, is vain. Most of our waking hours are spent in a series of unthinking acts which generally serve to increase anxiety instead of lessening it. To stave off lassitude, frustrations, and boredom, we introduce alcohol, drugs, sexual promiscuity, and other diversions into our lives —and end up suffering even more. Nothing really satisfies us; yet we continue, year after year, to believe (desperately, often) that things will somehow, miraculously, get better.

A cynic once wrote: "Life is short, brutal, and nasty." His definition is too short and his conclusion too nasty to suit me, yet I am forced to at least give him nodding assent. This world is *not* a Garden of Eden. Economic uncertainty, bodily disease, the potentiality of pain in all its forms are hounds which bay unceasingly at our doors. This, experience has taught me.

What Vedanta has taught me is that although the outside world is not an Eden, the inside world—that of our mind—can be. Vedanta convinced me that both the source of and

solution to the vast majority of our problems lie within the mind, not in the world outside; that peace, therefore, can only come when we have some measure of control over the restless wanderings of our thoughts—and when we are able to purify these thoughts. It is these convictions, I think, which have helped me continue the struggle to meditate, to draw the mind into the presence of God—if only for a few blessed, consuming moments.

How is it really possible to convey this immensely personal, insistent need for God? And yet it was just such a need, I am sure, which kept me attending lectures after a close friend brought me to my first one at the Hollywood temple in 1959.

A GROWING devotion slowly began to enter this "new life" of mine. True, it was hard to conceive what divine love was really like—love that by its very nature soars beyond the senses of perception—but wasn't this part of the religious struggle?

In this connection, I once recall reading where a Catholic father, who was spiritually advanced, was approached by an aspirant with the question, "How do I love God?" The father smiled and replied, "Just love him." His answer remained unchanged despite repeated attempts to elicit a more explanatory one.

Like this person I found myself asking similar questions, until I discovered that their answers (or many of them, anyway) lay within myself. But, of course, we still continue asking!

Vedanta has taught me to re-evaluate the whole meaning of prayer. The petitionary kind, I found, was much different from prayer that swells from the heart in search of divine

comfort—not divine favor. For the first time in my life I was hearing a minister say: "Pray to God with a loving heart; pray for the strength to love him" . . . with such sureness and conviction in his voice that I was almost helpless to doubt it.

Vedanta also introduced me to meditation. It seems remarkable that despite the great contributions of western philosophy and psychology there is so little concern with mental control. A quotation from the *Srimad Bhagavatam* somehow lodged itself in my memory: "Thus, when your mind and heart become calm and pure, you will learn to dwell in the consciousness of God. There you will find divine love." Now, in my own life, under the guidance of Swami Prabhavananda, I too was aspiring after that calmness and purity. But how sharp the edge of the razor!

I remember an incident two or three years ago which shook one conception I had of meditation. I was discussing with the Swami the attempt of some Zen Buddhists to empty their minds completely during "meditation."

"But what kind of meditation is this?" he said. "How can you meditate on nothing?"

His smile rescued me from total embarrassment.

As one might suspect, none of these new-found ideas became established in me overnight. The mind, long used to rejecting most things religious, had to be taught to *accept* things for a change. Faith must replace skepticism, cheerfulness help restore a balance in my life, and somehow, someway I had to develop an honest enjoyment of religion. The American Tragedy is largely the Puritan tragedy, and the equation of sin with joyfulness one of those mysteries still left unanswered.

This conversion to a new way of thinking about religion was not always easy. I had long regarded the average church-

goer with suspicion. To my mind he was a conservative and reactionary—a non-drinking, non-smoking namby-pamby. Of course, if he acted in the reverse of what you expected, then he was worse—a hypocrite!

Vedanta opened my eyes to the much greater, though perhaps hidden, strength necessary to pursue the religious life. Pause, it taught me, before casting stones of criticism. Even a dictator such as Napoleon declared, "tolerance is the greatest blessing of mankind," and yet I found myself presuming to criticize the greatness or smallness of world religions. What presumption, indeed!

Now I think I realize that by reproving or censuring others for their beliefs I am, in a sense, refuting the religion I have adopted—which accepts all true paths as threads leading to God. The important thing, it seems to me, is to stay on the path—regardless of which one.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

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been following had got me nowhere. Yet I did not feel I could withdraw from work. What else but work could I do?

Fortunately new light dawned. I came to realize that no one can contribute anything to God's projects. No one is necessary to the Lord. Whatever talent I may have—he can provide a score of workers with as much ability or more. Whatever efficiency I may manifest—he can easily get better results through other agencies. I cannot really do anything for him. I am not needed at all.

My attitude now is this. I can contribute nothing to God's world. But I am fortunate if he *lets* me work, or feel I am working. I am *privileged* if he permits me to think of him, to worship him, to draw close to him by imagining I am doing something for him. He does not need my help, but he allows me to work, or believe I am working, as a tangible act of adoration. He is like a mother who lets her child shell peas—which she could do ever so much easier herself—so that the child may love mother by believing he is helping mother.

Seen in this way, perhaps the idea of karma yoga is valid after all. The yoga of work succeeds when we finally know that work can never prevail. It operates eventually when work is turned into a gesture of love, when the daily round of our life is transformed into a sacrament. In removing the emphasis from me and my results, karma yoga rightly followed places emphasis upon Him; and the little efforts we must make, because we can do nothing else, become rituals, offerings, acts of meditation.

Vedanta and the West

Vedanta teaches that man's real nature is divine; that it is the aim of man's life to unfold and manifest this divinity; and that truth is universal. Vedanta accepts all the religions of the world and reveres the great prophets, teachers, and sons of God, because it recognizes the same divine inspiration in all.

STUDENT'S NOTEBOOK No. 30

For many westerners, running over as they do with enthusiasm and enterprise, karma yoga is recommended as a practical way toward perfection. One will gain knowledge through action—selfless action done as worship, performed as an offering to God. By laboring for the Lord one will come to identify increasingly with him and more and more lose sight of oneself.

That is the idea. But I am not at all sure that karma yoga works. I tried to follow this path for years. What an amount of labor I gave; what numerous, noble projects I carried out! But it all went wrong. When enterprises succeeded I could not avoid taking the credit. When efforts miscarried I felt disgraced. In both cases it was I that remained prominent, not God.

When this became clear I felt I was at the end of the line. Enterprise was a trap; the concept of karma yoga was a fraud. The approach I had

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